

OUTGOING CHAIRMAN REMARKS

**Hon. George K. Heartwell
Mayor of Grand Rapids, MI USA**

It has been an honor to have served as your Chairman this year. I want to thank my colleagues on the Board for having the confidence to entrust me with leadership of this great organization. The Cities Initiative is stronger today than it was when I took over a year ago. I know it will be stronger a year from now.

The public perception of the importance of this Great Lakes and St. Lawrence basin is growing day by day. Ten years ago we might have been called environmental wackos, tree huggers, or nature lovers. Today the mayor who stands for the environment – for clean water and the protection of natural assets – is a far-sighted leader who knows that his or her city is nothing (will be nothing) if it trashes its natural resources and wastes its environmental assets. Our economies, our prosperity, our future is integrally connected to the natural environment...and in our case that's the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River.

We are extraordinarily fortunate – I can't say this clearly enough – to have the staff leadership of Dave Ullrich. Having walked the corridors of power in Washington with Dave on more than one occasion I can tell

you that he is highly respected as one with a background in government and a passion for the role of cities in protecting the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence. Listening to Dave testify recently before a Senate Committee I was awed at his command of information and his thoughtful, diplomatic approach.

Not only is Dave an able representative but he has assembled a team of professionals who are – if I may use an English phrase which hopefully has an appropriate French translation – kicking butt. The Cities Initiative is widely seen as a strong, emerging voice for the Great Lakes, representing a group of mayors who are sick and tired of politics as usual and who are taking charge in their own cities and regions when federal, provincial and state governments are paralyzed by fear, partisanship and a decided lack of creativity. We have a professional team in place who are ensuring that our voice will not be ignored.

So I've finished a year of serving you as your Chairman. For your penance I'm going to ask you to indulge me for five minutes as I try to tell you what these Lakes mean to me.

There isn't a mayor in this room – no there isn't a person in this room – who doesn't understand the essential economic role that the Great lakes and St. Lawrence River play in our communities' collective lives. Tourism, shipping, sport or commercial fishing; fresh water for drinking, for industry; power production...what would we be without our Lakes and River. This

is as important to me, a city 32 miles inland from Lake Michigan, as it is to you, with your beaches and harbors and ports.

But the Lakes are more than commerce and tourism.

Listen to my friend Jerry Dennis describe his first experience with the Lake Michigan as a five year old child in his book *The Living Great Lakes*:

“For me it was a revelation.

I remember standing in the sand, feeling very small. Gulls kited stationary above me, then banked their wings against the wind and soared away. The wind was cool and fresh and smelled like rain. A wave curled and broke; water rushed up on the sand, spread thin, and sank. The shore stretched as far as I could see, from the haze-obscured curve of Platte Bay to the massive yellow flank of Sleeping Bear Dunes. The lake was too vast for comprehension. It was nothing but water to the edge of the earth.”

Have you been there? Have you seen it and smelled it and felt it? Of course you have.

There is something bigger here than commerce; something larger than a community’s economic well-being.

There is something of the soul here. It defies language. It was here before there were humans to experience it...it will be here long after the memory of the last people has passed.

I’m a hiker and one summer I spent a week on a solo hike on the Pictured Rocks trail, overlooking Superior between Munising and Grand Marais. I was camped one night in a picturesque area with the decidedly un-picturesque name Potato Field. I pitched my tent and made my little dinner then I walked to the edge of the escarpment overlooking Lake Superior and sat on a rock. Bank upon bank of gray cloud rolled across from the west and even this high above the water I could hear the rhythmic crash of wave upon wave on the rocks below me. I suppose I’ll never fully understand what happened but I fell under the spell of the Lake and I entered the rhythm of the water and I was wholly conscious that my body consists primarily of water and that the water within me and the water that rolled beneath me and the water in the clouds above me...are all one water, one consciousness, one creation. And I know now what I understood in the spirit then: that injury to one water is injury to all water...that the death of the lakes is the death of the clouds is the death of me.

And then, how could I not love the lakes and want everything that is good for them; for to love the lakes is to love myself, is to love humankind. So whether you see them in the eye of the spirit or see them through the lens of commerce...it’s all the same. We cannot let these lakes

die or we sign our own death warrant. We and they are one...inextricable, inter-dependent, one element, one spirit.

I feel closer to you than I do to mayors in any other context – Municipal League, National League of Cities, US Conference of Mayors. With them I share a desire for efficiency of government, quality infrastructure and exceptional human services. But my link with you is spiritual. We are protecting an element of the natural order that, while grand and powerful, is ultimately fragile.

Thank you for being colleagues willing to walk with me into the fires of political controversy on behalf of these sacred waters. Serving with you is an honor beyond description.

June 17, 2010
Milwaukee, WI